

Title: Run with Endurance (the baton is a cross)  
Text: Hebrews 12.1-2  
Theme: Living as if you can see what is not yet seen  
Series: Hebrews #45  
Prop Stmt Faith is living daily as if you can see what is not yet seen

Joel Northrup is a high-school sophomore in Iowa. He made the news this past week when he forfeited a match in the state's wrestling tournament because, sadly, athletic officials matched him up against a girl. Joel's record (35-4) is rather impressive. But Joel said, "I have a tremendous amount of respect for Cassy and Megan [the girls in the wrestling tournament] and their accomplishments. However, wrestling is a combat sport and it can get violent at times. As a matter of conscience and my faith I do not believe that is appropriate for a boy to engage a girl in this manner. It is unfortunate that I have been placed in a situation not seen in most other high school sports in Iowa."

Joel recognizes that body slams and takedowns are not ways to show respect for girls. Even if the girl asks for it by signing up for the sport, you still don't do it. Joel realized that there is something more important than winning a match and that is living by your convictions. The reaction came quickly. One ESPN writer proving that common sense is not too common said that if Joel really wanted to respect Cassy he should have wrestled her. "Body slams and takedowns and gouges in the eye and elbows in the ribs are exactly how to respect [the girl]." Cassy's father agrees. In speaking of his daughter he said, "She has always been my son."

The attempt to eliminate gender is naïve at best and godless at worse. God made us as male and female. God made two genders with some similarities and with some distinctions. But, human nature hates the authority of God. So, we fight against the structure and definition that God has provided for genders, for relationships, for marriage, for work, etc. because we all want to have the autonomy to define our own lives as we want, which means, we want to be God. So, when a guy like Joel stands up and recognizes the God-given distinctions and that is the man's job to respect, to love, to protect a woman, he sets off "enlightened" women who say, we don't need protection, we can hold our own! And they can, but that is not the point. God made gender distinctions to teach us about him. Marriage is not about your happiness, it is about Christ and the church. The bi-unity in marriage is a reflection of the Tri-unity of God. But, when we attempt to live without any thought of the authority of God, then of course, we are going to come to the conclusion that it is perfectly acceptable for guys to fight girls. But, sadly, this is our country now. In so many ways, our home doesn't seem like home anymore – does it. Like the believers to whom the book of Hebrews was written, we are pilgrims. We are residents of another country, citizens of another city, members of another race. We are, the people of God and as such we long for the home where we really belong. But, we are not there yet. And until we are there, we live in this present world with the wind in our face and with people who do not understand us. It can be lonely. It can get discouraging. To this world, we look weird. But, we don't do this alone.

Read Text:

Now, thus far in our study of this book we have made our way through some very rich terrain. Our souls have been fed with some good and satisfying truths and our hearts have drunk from refreshing fountains that helped us to see how so many things that God did in the old testament were all set-ups for Christ. And while, all of that has been good and necessary for us, these last two chapters are actually the reason for which the book was written. Every book has a purpose. The purpose of this book is to challenge and encourage believers to press on with joy, or in the words of v. 1, to “run with endurance.”

But this is no gut it out, suck it in, put your game face on speech that calls you to man-up and just be tough. This is not the Bible’s version of the little engine that could. Oh no, we are the people who cannot. We cannot run with endurance by ourselves. We cannot run with endurance apart from Christ. We cannot run with endurance without leaning heavily upon the promises of God. We cannot run with endurance by tolerating sin and becoming distracted by lesser things. We are the people who cannot run with endurance by ourselves, but who can endure, persevere and press on through Christ.

Do you know this chapter is here? God knows that you and I are tempted to quit. God knows that life comes with some very serious disappointments. God knows that we are prone to discouragement and vulnerable to the failures of others and that we get tired of fighting sin in our lives and tired of being let down by others and tired of having to be strong for others. We get tired of the persecution and tired of the battle and tired of being tired. We get tired of the wind in our face and tired of feeling like we don’t fit in with this world and tired of being faithful when others do not appreciate us or what we do. God knows that in our culture, we breathe the toxic air of entitlement. We are so tempted to believe that we have rights and that God owes us a comfortable life. God knows that we need to get slapped in the face by reality. God knows that we forget about what Christ did and we forget about the baton that is in our hands and we forget about the people who are looking to us and we forget about the joy that awaits us. We need to hear this. I need to hear this. Today I need to preach this to you because tomorrow you will need to preach this to me.

Look at this text! Look at how much emphasis the AH places upon us and we. This guy is putting himself right in the middle of this, isn’t he? He is part of the track team of faith and he is preaching to himself. The other thing that stands out is how much emphasis is placed on the word “endure.” (1,2,3,7)

Run with Endurance! Press on with Joy! And in these first two verses there are 5 reasons why you must press on with joy.

Run with Endurance...(rely on the promises of God)

1. **Because others are depending on you.** (1a)

“therefore”

Verse 1 begins with the word “therefore” which takes us back to the last two verses of chapter 11. Hebrews 11 ends with a gripping picture of historical and personal accounts of endurance by the people of God who pressed on in the face of much opposition and in some cases, with no observable benefit or reward. Two weeks ago I said, “These words describe the stories of the faithful on whose shoulders we stand. The baton of faith that has been handed to you is dented, scratched, and stained with the blood and tears of thousands whose faithfulness was lived out before the eyes of a very few. The reason this baton has made it to you is because these people did not drop it, nor throw it away.” But it is not just their example that stirs us and calls us, and gives us a lump in our throats. It’s the fact (as 11.40 says) that God has “provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

Now, that word “perfect” is a bit difficult to translate. It is actually related to the same word that Christ cried out when he was on the cross that is translated, “it is finished.” The root word means goal, purpose, completion, achieved, accomplished, done and perfect. All of these related ideas are bound up in this word. So, when the AH writes about these men and women and then says that they did not receive what was promised, and that without us, they should not be made perfect, he means that the completion of the purpose of their faithfulness, the goal of their life, the mission for which they endured hardship is not completed without us completing ours. And here is why. They lived by faith in the promise that God was going to send a Redeemer – and God did. We live now in light of the fact that God kept his Word and sent us a Redeemer who accomplished perfectly all that He was sent to do. God provided something better for us. They persevered on the basis of the Old Covenant. We are called to persevere on the basis of the New and Superior Covenant.

Please do not miss this, because this stands at the very heart of the message of Hebrews. The factuality of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is not only proof positive that God keeps his word, but the completion of the ministry of Christ on this earth is the basis upon which all other promises of God are guaranteed. We look forward with certainty because we can look back at what was accomplished.

The old testament saints could only look forward. They only had the promises of the Redeemer who would come. They did not live with the certainty of what had been accomplished, but they lived with the hope of what would be accomplished. We live with the hope of what will be accomplished knowing that what will be accomplished is guaranteed because of the reality of what God has already done. We run with endurance because we run with the confident expectation that God finishes what he starts. God keeps his Word. We have even more evidence of that than the people whose stories are told in this book. So, we look back at their example and we look back and realize that the job is not done. We have a responsibility to them. The race that they began is now ours to run. They are depending on you. (us)

## 2. Because others are watching you. (1a)

“We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

Now, what is a witness? A witness is one who speaks to that which he has observed. He watches and he testifies. One of the questions that people often ask me is, “Will we know each other in heaven?” I usually say something like, “do we know each other here on earth?” Then I will say something like, “We will not be more stupid in heaven than we are right now on earth. So, yes, we will know each other.” Of course the difference will be is that we will all really like each other. It won’t be a matter of tolerating each other, but we will truly delight in each other. The next most popular question I get is, “Can people in heaven see us? Do they know what is going on here on earth?”

As you might well imagine there is a bit of debate as to whether we can use this text to support that. On the one hand, there are those who say that in heaven there are no tears and no sorrow, so of course God would not let them see what is going on here, it would be too sad for them. But, the text that speaks of God wiping away every tear is in Revelation 21 and speaks of what He WILL do in the new heaven and the new earth. On the other hand, it is clear that the author of Hebrews is using an athletic metaphor to convey his point. Like a marathon runner has to run with endurance, so we have to persevere, as Eugene Peterson put it, “a long obedience in the same direction.”

Since the point of this text is on endurance and the author of Hebrews is using the analogy of running, it would not be fair to press the analogy too far so that we have these witnesses watching and observing us like they do in an actual race. The point is not racing, but enduring faithfulness, like a race. I understand that. I agree that the author of Hebrew’s emphasis here is on faithfulness and persevering. However, he says that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” That means that they (this cloud, this enormous group of people who were faithful and whose lives and ministries were handed off to us to continue) observe and they testify. I grant you that their lives testify to us of the grace that God will provide for our race. But, what do they observe? Is their testimony limited to their observations of God’s faithfulness to them in their lives, or do they get to observe us, right now?

Now, I grant you that the main point that the author of Hebrews is making here is that part of our motivation to press on with joy is because we are responsible to these people to carry on the mission that they participated in, but I believe that this text not only allows for the idea that they can see us, I really believe that they can and I think that this is part of the argument for faithfulness. That phrase, “surrounded by” implies that they are witnesses to our lives right now. It is not the ultimate argument for faithfulness – Christ is that, as we will see, but it is a powerful one.

So, while I believe that the wording of this verse allows for those who are in heaven right now to see us, what really leads me to believe that this is likely the case, is what happens in the rest of this book. Let's run ahead for a minute and see what I mean.

These believers to whom this book was written, were, like some of you, thinking about quitting because it was just too tough. Like some of you, they were thinking, "I do not matter. It does not matter if I persevere, after all, I am just one. I do not affect others. No one will really miss me. Someone else will take my place. I do not have an important position. I am not a big name. I can simply fade away." To you, to these people, it's like the author of Hebrews is saying, "Do you have any idea of what is going on?" Beginning in verse 18 he says (and I am paraphrasing), when we gather to worship, we do not gather around the base of a mountain, like the OT people did around Sinai. Oh no! We've got something better. When we gather to worship, we worship in the very presence of angels. We worship in the very presence of God. We are (right now) in the assembly (v.23) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, which I take to mean the believers who have gone on before. I think of how some of you hold back your voices because you hold back your affection. I think of how some of you get bored with this and want you to consider what the cloud of witnesses is observing from you. We are part of something that is so much bigger than us, even when we are all by ourselves; we are never really by ourselves. Is this really true? I do not see it, but is it true? God says so

The whole point of the end of this book is to point out that every single thing that you do matters because your private life is public to God, your private life is even public to the angels, some of whom show up from time to time as strangers (13.2), so be careful how to treat them. Be careful about immorality. Stay away from adultery (13.4) and the love of money (13.5) because everything that you do as a follower of Christ affects the rest of us and it affects those who have already finished the race. So, yes, I believe that those who have died in Christ are witnesses and are observing us. But, here is the difference. In most athletic events the stars are the players on the field. The only time when that is not the case is when all of the past champions gather for a reunion and come to watch you play. On that day you put on the uniform that was worn by another. Their presence reminds you of the tradition, the legacy and the expectation that is now yours. But their admonition, cheering and encouraging is more than a testimony to a tradition, it is call to a present reality. If you could see what they can see, then you would know that it is worth it. But, you can't see, yet. That is why, it is by faith and not by grit. It is by faith. It is believing that the promises of God and the plan of God is outweighs the promises of this world. Run with endurance...

### 3. **By running with others.** (us)

Guess what? We will not play solitaire in eternity! We will not live by ourselves in eternity. Why not? When Christ saved us, rescued us, redeemed us, He saved us from sin which separates us from God and from each other. Even in a perfect world God said that it was NOT good that man should be alone because God made us to be

incomplete without being relationship with Him and through Him with others. When you trust in Christ, you are saved from isolation and independence to community and mutual dependence upon God through Christ. Our need of each other is particularly obvious when we, like these believers are discouraged and under pressure. Notice the emphasis that this text places upon the fact that running the race of faith is something that we do in partnership with others.

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (1) You absolutely cannot miss the plural pronouns throughout this section. This is screaming to us of the importance of being committed to other believers. That means to formally place myself into a relationship where I say “you can depend on me and I will depend on you.” We have a term for that. Simply put, it is membership, or partnership. That rubs some of you the wrong way because you are facing the wrong direction. You don’t want to be depended upon. You don’t want to be part of a body, a family, a flock where you are known and expected to run. What do you think the gospel is about? It is NOT about getting a ticket so that after death you can have an eternal retirement where your solitaire is not interrupted by doctor’s appointments.

We have to think of ourselves the way God sees us. “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2.10) It is a theme throughout the entire Bible. God’s plan is to call a people out of this world unto himself. And though we are called out of this world, we still live in this world. That means that we live with the affects now of a temporary body that groans with decay, and we need to be reminded and we need to remind each other of the promises that God has given to us of glory. That means that we live now with the feelings of loneliness and disconnection and we need to be reminded and we need to remind each other of our eternal standing in Christ and the promise that one day we will love perfectly and be loved perfectly and know perfectly and will be known perfectly. That means that we live now with sin and failure and rejection and heartache, but because of Christ, one day we will be saved from the presence of sin, and from the effects of sin. We run knowing that the outcome is secure. But that does not mean that the running is easy. Oh no, the wind of the world is in our face, but together we can be reminded that the breath of God is in our back.